DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 425 254 UD 032 669

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TITLE Listen to the Children: Children at Risk for Failure Speak Out.
PUB DATE 1998-00-00
NOTE 12p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Educational Environment; Educational Improvement; *High Risk Students; High School Students; High Schools; *Participative Decision Making; Student Attitudes; Student Empowerment; *Student Participation

ABSTRACT

Before educators can assess the problems associated with being at risk of academic failure, they must understand what is occurring in the lives of at-risk students. The focus of this study was the school lives of 15 high school students. Data were gathered from student observations, informal interviews, document analysis, and journal entries to identify the factors that contributed to being at risk. Students complained about the inconsistency of school rules, especially those related to tardiness and eating in school, and they noted the double standard that allowed teachers to do many things students were not allowed to do. They voiced concerns that they were never given a say about anything in the school, expressing the belief that all the rules originated with teachers and staff, and that student input was not solicited. When they did express opinions about school, they thought that their comments were not taken seriously. Suggestions for improving the educational environment for at-risk students begin with providing opportunities for students to express their opinions and contribute to the operation of the school. (Contains four references.) (SLD)

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LISTEN TO THE CHILDREN:

Children At Risk for Failure Speak Out

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UDO32669

Abstract

In education today, we continue to use treatments and strategies that have not worked in the past and are outdated for today's students. While at risk students have been identified by several common characteristics, the programs generally in place for these students have failed to exhibit promising results

Before educators can assess the problems associated with being at risk, we must first understand what is occurring in the lives of these students. In order to assist and better understand, it is necessary to gain insight into what is going on in these students' lives. This study focused on this process.

LISTEN TO THE CHILDREN

Children At Risk for Failure Speak Out

Running Head: Listen to the Children

Listen to the Children:Students At Risk Speak Out

In education, it seems that we continue to use treatments that have not worked in the past. Even though we know there is a large dropout problem among students who exhibit characteristics which place them at risk, and we have identified numerous remedies that have failed to work, we continue to use them. Farrell et al (1988) point out that in an attempt to meet the needs of these students at risk for failure, educational institutions have tried a myriad of different programs without significant success.

In order to better understand the underlying factors which contribute to this problem, I went into the schools and the classrooms, to get a firs-hand view of what was occurring in the lives of these students. As the teacher of several classes of students who had been identified as being at risk for dropping out of school, I was in a position to delve into factors which might not have been noticed by casual observation.

As a teacher and researcher, I spent one school year teaching, observing, and talking with these students. Most information for this study came directly from the students involved. According to Farrell et al (1988), in order to better understand and offer assistance to the at-risk population, it will be necessary to gain an understanding which goes beyond just using records in student folders or test scores. It is necessary to inquire into the lives of these students in order to develop effective intervention programs. In order to know what is going

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on in their lives, we must give the students a voice.

The theoretical framework for this study was based on research by Rumberger (1987), which found that dropping out of school is part of a long, systematic process which varies by individual. Finn (1989) stated that when a student leaves school before graduation, it may be only one event in a long chain that may have its beginnings years earlier.

The recent concern for the dropout problem is focused on the fact that when students dropout before graduation, it not only has an adverse effect on the individual, but it also adversely affects society (Rumberger, 1987). These students will face a much more difficult future than other students who finish high school or college. They will have lower earnings and more unemployment than high school and college graduates. (National Center for Education Statistics, 1993). Because the workplace of the future will require increased literacy, more education, and more advanced technological skills, it is imperative that educators find more satisfactory ways of instilling a desire for lifelong learning.

In order to address this problem from the inside out, this study focused on the process in the life of each student identified, which has led to a state of being at risk of dropping out of school. Student observations, informal interviews, document analysis, and journal entries were used to address this question. Students were observed closely over the course of the school year to observe changes in behavior, attitude, and

academics. This study involved 15 students in a class for students at risk of dropping out of school. Student comments on home environment, school environment and other factors affecting their lives were recorded and analyzed. Journal entries were also utilized.

From this study, the following concerns were voiced:

Students consistently complained about the inconsistency of the school rules. They felt there was a double standard as far as they and the teachers were concerned. While they received tardies, several teachers repeatedly came in late. They said if the teachers could do it, why couldn 't they?

Another area of inconsistency was raised by students in the area of eating and drinking in class. While they are not allowed to do this, teachers eat and drink in the classroom on a daily basis. This also applied to the no-gum chewing rule. While students were disciplined for chewing gum, teachers could be seen chewing gum or eating candy daily.

Students also voiced the concern that they were never given a say in anything at the school. From the rules on down to social activities, student voices are never acknowledged. Teachers and administrators are always wanting to know what is wrong and what can be done to improve schools for the students, yet the students involved are never given any voice in what will directly affect them. According to the students, no one at the school listens to them. They (administrators, teachers, and counselors) make all the rules and decisions and students are not

listened to. It does no good to say anything because no one at the school seems to care to hear their opinions. It will ultimately be their (administrators, teachers, and counselors) way or no way. Because of the fact that students felt they had no say, they rebelled against all the rules and authority in general. One student expressed this by saying:

> We're going to do what we want to anyway and they (the school) can't stop us. We'll do what we want to do. They won't listen to us and we won't listen to them.

These students have the opinion that they cannot be made to do anything they do not want to do. Authority means nothing to them. They have very little respect for anyone in authority.

Students expressed this same attitude toward authority when they discussed the use of drugs in their school. They see nothing wrong with marijuana and feel that students are smoking this as well as using other drugs in the schools. They have the opinion that this is a problem which is beyond the reach of the schools to correct. One student reaction to this problem was:

> I don't think it (drugs) affects the students absents because people smoke it and then come to school. There is really no effect on the school because people smoke it and then come to school.

Another student took a different view of this situation:

> Marijuana is a major problem in our school system. Mainly because teens today smoke this drug. They smoke it before school and after school. I don't believe that the school could help because the students don't smoke it here. Teenagers turn to drugs mainly to get high and to feel good. Some turn to drugs because of the money.

In this study, one of the recurring themes was the lack of attention paid to what students had to say. Students felt that

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they did not have a say in what would ultimately affect them. Teachers and administrators decided all the rules and the students had to abide by them. Students felt they should be listened to about things that concerned them at their school. This led to another area of concern; double standards for students and teachers. Students must abide by the rules such as no eating or drinking in class, no gum chewing, and the late policy. Teachers on the other hand, can be seen daily eating, drinking and chewing gum openly in front of the students. As far as the late policy, students receive tardies when they are not on time to class, while teachers come to school late and do not receive ;any kind of attention. Students feel double standards exist in many areas of school.

Students also expressed their feelings regarding teenage pregnancy in the schools. Most did not see this as being a problem.

> Today teenagers are more advanced than back in the 60's. Plus today you learn more things about sex and alot of your friends are having sex. The youth today make their own decisions and they don't have the proper guidance to instruct them. The best thing I can say is let them learn from their mistakes and sooner or later teenagers will realize that there is more to life than just sex.

Just as adults want to be heard, so too do students in high school. If we are to help students in our schools today, and instill in them a love for learning and the desire to succeed, we must first find better ways to interest them in completing school. What better way is there to learn what students see as wrong with our schools than to ask the students themselves?

From this study, the following recommendations are given:

First, as one of the major concerns among students with regard to their home environment was not enough parenting, schools could bring in resource people from the community to help educate and counsel parents in parental responsibility. Parental workshops held at the school with community speakers to address both parents and students on parental responsibilities could offer information and assistance to students as well as parents. Secondly, organizations such as Big Brothers and Big Sisters could work more directly through the school to assist and counsel students and offer assistance to students who wanted and needed help.

Students felt they were not being taken seriously when they voiced their opinions in the school. They also expressed a general boredom with school. Therefore, low-achieving and low-ability students could be involved in all aspects of school in order to feel like they are a part of the school. Students at risk of dropping out should be given an equal voice in planning school activities and setting school rules. Because these are the very students who need the involvement, and yet they are the ones who are usually excluded, an improved plan for elections, etc. could be implemented to insure that all students have a chance to voice opinions on matters which concern all students in a school.

Students were also concerned with pregnancy and drug use in and out of school. Student-led discussions on pregnancy and

drugs should address these problems. Students who have had direct past experience would be more readily listened to than an adult who is lecturing on these subjects. Students who have had direct experience themselves, through a family member, or through a friend, could be used as speakers or peer-counselors for other students to come to talk with.

As to future plans, in-school workshops could be planned and held to direct student interest. Begin early to develop interests, do not wait until students reach high school. Community and business leaders should be invited to speak to classes individually, and to the whole school, on career opportunities for the future. Career days could also be planned for younger students, perhaps at the elementary level, to peak their interest in certain careers and post-high school education.

In order to change what appears to not have worked in the past, we must listen to the people who are directly affected by what we will do in the future. We must start listening to the students and stop being afraid they will undermine our authority. Educators could learn a lesson from business ;and industry, and listen to the workers to find out what will improve our product.

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